

# ACCESS



Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. is a civil rights organization with a mission to promote the value of diversity and ensure all people an equal opportunity to live in housing and communities of their choice. Through education, advocacy, and enforcement of fair housing laws, HOME seeks to ensure that everyone can: have their voices heard on their housing issues; defend and safeguard their rights; and have their concerns genuinely considered when decisions are being made about their lives and housing. Learn more at [homeny.org](http://homeny.org). Get updates about fair housing happenings via Facebook (@HOMEnyinc) or Instagram (@homenyorg).

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## ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN HOUSING

By Olivia Carl

In our two previous issues of Access, we explained the basics of reasonable accommodations and modifications and expanded on them to discuss service and support animals. In this edition, we will be looking at assistive technology and what kind of accommodations or modifications can be requested with this in mind.

### WHAT IS ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY?

Assistive technology is any product, equipment, and/or system that improves the learning, working, and daily living of individuals with disabilities. Assistive technology can range from tools such as magnifiers or more complex technology such as text-to-speech software or motorized wheelchairs. Specific to housing, assistive technology serves to enhance the functional capabilities of a person with disabilities inside their home.

### EXAMPLES OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION OR MODIFICATIONS REQUESTS:

The person requesting a reasonable accommodation or modification is usually an expert in regard to their own disability and the accommodations or modifications that are appropriate. Each request may be different, but some examples of accommodations and modifications related to assistive technology are below.

For blind or visually impaired prospective renters or tenants, assistive technology such as braille displays or other tactile signage inside their homes may be an example of a reasonable accommodation request. These requests may be made for tactile signage to be placed on a tenant's mailbox

or on their kitchen appliance controls. If the building has an elevator, a reasonable accommodation request may be made to have raised or braille numbers/lettering that are properly located for individuals with visual impairments to be able to access the elevator.

Tenants who are deaf or who have a hearing impairment may request a reasonable modification to their unit for the installation of a flashing doorbell that has visible strobe lights. This would assist the tenant by helping them know when someone is at their door. The tenant would be responsible for the cost of the doorbell, strobe light equipment, and installation, and may have to restore the property to its original condition, but the landlord cannot deny the tenant from doing so. Tenants who are deaf may also request a reasonable accommodation if the building they reside in uses an intercom or audio-based entry system. Tenants can request an equally effective alternative to be let into their buildings as long as it does not create an undue financial burden on the housing provider.

### IF YOU NEED ASSISTANCE:

Denying a request to accommodate or modify rules or practices by a housing provider is an act of housing discrimination. If this happens to you, please contact HOME at 716-854-1400 or [info@homeny.org](mailto:info@homeny.org). We can also help with drafting accommodation requests to ensure that you are able to improve the functional capabilities of living inside your home. We are also there to answer any questions you may have about your rights when it comes to reasonable accommodations, modifications, or any other housing issues. ▲▲▲▲



Access is a newsletter focusing on housing and health related issues faced by Western New York residents who have disabilities and/or who are aged 55+. Access is created by HOME (Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc.), a nonprofit civil rights and fair housing organization which has been using education, advocacy, and enforcement to fight housing discrimination and homelessness since 1963.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMBATting MENTAL HEALTH AND DISABILITY STIGMA

By Steven Haagsma

Living with a disability or mental health challenge can be difficult enough, but often people also face stigma that makes them feel unable to share their personal stories or fully embrace their identities. The Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition is seeking to reduce these stigmas by sharing the stories of regular people facing these challenges and providing resources for individuals looking for help.

Founded over six years ago, the Anti-Stigma Coalition also hosts monthly Facebook Live events where people can learn from experts about important topics like stress, trauma, and mental health for first responders, understanding mental health challenges in the LGBTQ+ community, and how teachers and school staff manage the stress of returning to school. They also work with media bodies to use less stigmatizing language in their reporting.

When it comes to stigma surrounding mental health, Melinda DuBois, the Chair of the Anti-Stigma Coalition, says, "We know that sometimes

the biggest challenges people struggling with mental illness face aren't their illnesses at all. It is the stigma or negative feelings, attitudes and stereotypes that surround mental health can make getting help scary and leading a fulfilling life difficult. Stigma prevents people from seeking help. It restricts resources from being allocated. And it discourages others from lending their support. One of the best ways to stop the stigma is to learn more about mental illness. Separating the truth from the stigma can help increase awareness, understanding and acceptance for those living with mental health challenges."

DuBois encourages people who want to get involved in the coalition's work to visit their website at [letstalkstigma.org](http://letstalkstigma.org) to learn more about stigma. People can also become members of the coalition as individuals or as organizations (as HOME has) and take the pledge to end stigma. ▲▲▲▲

# THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND DISABILITY IN BUFFALO

By Haley Blazer

Intersectionality is a term first described by critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. In the late 1980's, she aimed to explore the complex social phenomenon of double oppression that black women experience in the United States. This idea of intersectionality becomes increasingly important in modern day America, as people have several aspects to their identity. Individuals with disabilities are also members of many other groups and communities; and just as people are now more nuanced, so is discrimination. The way in which various characteristics intersect can shape the way a person is seen by society and result in unjust stereotypes. Let's look at an example in which three people are qualified to rent an apartment here in Buffalo, and they contact a landlord:



The landlord may rent to the elderly white woman with mobility limitations who is living off her retirement and social security income.



That same landlord may rent to a single black female who is actively working and not disabled.

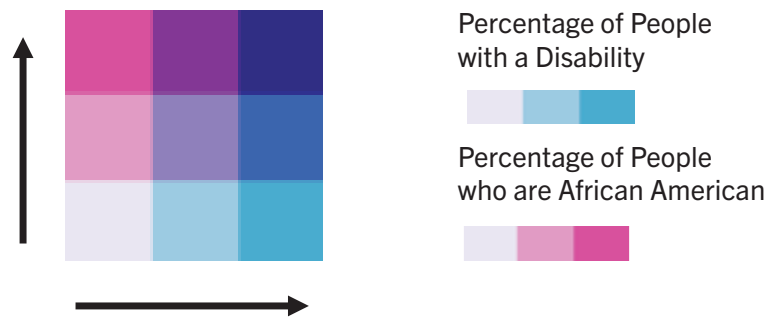
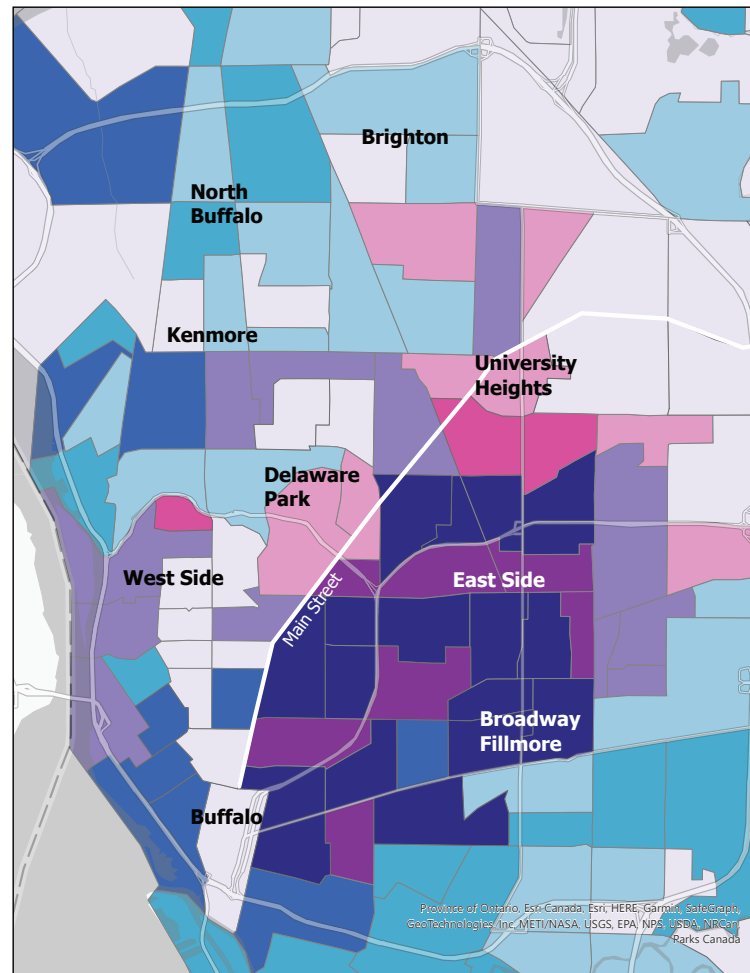


But due to an unjust stereotype, the landlord may discriminate against the black woman who is disabled and also receives government assistance.

In this example, the assumptions the landlord carries come from complex and multidimensional prejudice. It is the intersection of her race and disability status that has somehow given the landlord a negative view of her. Not only is this **unjust**, but it is **illegal**.

People who are members of more than one minority group often experience life in a unique and challenging way. It is our job here at Housing Opportunities Made Equal to address particularities such as this and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach when assisting clients. Every individual that comes to us has their own story and we take that into account as we work, examining how interlocking aspects of identity can have a two-fold effect on housing opportunities.

In Buffalo, the impact that decades of housing discrimination have had on folks of color who are also disabled can be seen in the map to the right. The shades of pink represent the percentage of people who identify as African American within an area. The shades of blue represent the percentage of people with a disability within that area. When the data is overlapped, you can see dark purple shades concentrated in the East Side of Buffalo. For decades, people of color who have disabilities have been confined to this space. When looking at data, and listening to people's stories, we must question WHY. Patterns such as these are not naturally occurring, and our job here at HOME is to investigate *and fight against* all inequalities and discrepancies. ▲▲▲▲



Data is from the U.S. Census Bureau and the American Community Survey- Data Table S1810. Map created by Haley Blazer for Housing Opportunities Made Equal WNY on May 5th, 2023 using ArcGIS Pro. Portions of this image include intellectual property of Esri and its licensors and are used under license. Copyright © 2023. All rights reserved.



## ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR MORE ACCESSIBILITY STRATEGISTS IN HOUSING

By Brynn Covington

If you went to your favorite website but could only navigate it using your keyboard (no mouse), would you be able to? What if I asked you to use your elbow or wrist to open a closed door in your home? For those who don't identify as having a disability, these probably aren't familiar tasks. However, for someone who identifies as having a disability, this might be routine. Whether or not we're able to accomplish these tasks, regardless of ability, relies upon the accessibility of the website or home. And while they don't always adopt the title, identifying these accessibility features is often the job of an accessibility strategist.

When I say "accessibility strategist", I'm talking about people who assess and coordinate efforts to eliminate barriers to accessibility. These are often persons with disabilities themselves who can help other folks with disabilities problem-solve attainable solutions to make daily life more manageable. Though they often work in fields like IT, an accessibility strategist in housing would be someone who develops strategies for folks with disabilities so that apartments, homes, and other types of housing can incorporate both accessible and universal design. Universal design, in this context, is the design and construction or composition of a building so that it can be accessed and used to its fullest extent by any person. Accessibility strategists will have the lived experience and/or education to apply the fundamentals of universal design, and will center their approach on the safety, independence, and dignity of a space and its resident.

It's no secret that there are limited resources when it comes to accessible housing. A major barrier to housing for folks with disabilities is not only a lack of presently accessible housing, but also a lack of newly

erected buildings that do or will embed all-encompassing access. It can be stressful and near impossible to find an architect that will understand and facilitate building an accessible home, especially when "accessible home" is subjective – someone with a mobility impairment might need a roll-under sink, whereas someone with a visual impairment might need special lighting.

An accessibility strategist would have the knowledge and background to act as necessary intermediaries between folks with disabilities and designers, developers, and builders. They would have a thorough understanding of federal and local codes to incorporate inclusive building design, modifications, or adaptations into their plans. Too often, accessible units are designed to promote primarily physical access, since this is required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, an accessibility strategist would take a cross-disability approach to ensure best-fit environments for multiple disability access needs.

As discussed in prior Access newsletters, HOME has worked with a handful of community members with disabilities to install lifts to their homes through our modification program. This program was necessary for many folks in our area, but with limited funding, only a few lifts were able to be installed. With more accessibility strategists, we would be better advised about cost-effective ways to modify homes for accessibility. And with the help of those same

accessibility strategists, we could ultimately eliminate the need for so many costly modifications by focusing on inclusion and access as a design strategy instead of a modification strategy.

Not all of us are persons with disabilities, but this remains a necessary conversation for the community to have. Many of us who reach old age will eventually require things like grab bars or ramps, and we're not immune from earlier inevitable accidents. By being accessibility-forward now and calling on accessibility strategists to help shape our housing landscape, we are in a much better position to accommodate our community members who require accessible housing, the aging population, and our future selves. ▲▲▲▲

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